NEWS

PRIDEfest celebrates LGBTQ+ community in Winchester

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Winchester residents came out on June 12 to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community during the 5th Annual PRIDEfest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/RICHARD HOWARD

About 300 residents flooded into the town common, dancing und
rainbow banners, music blasting, and honoring the LGBTQ+ com

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resilience and joy. The 5th annual PRIDEfest celebration proved once again that Pride is more than an annual event, it's a movement.

The 5th annual PRIDEfest celebration was held June 12 on a sunny and hot Thursday afternoon. Over 25 organizations took part and residents came and went over the two hours of the celebration and festival.

School Committee Vice Chair Tim Matthews speaks during PRIDEfest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/RICHARD HOWARD

"It was wonderful to see so many people coming out," said a self-identified queer student at Winchester High School.

The student moved to Winchester just this past year and explained that they never knew how the community was in town.

"It is comforting to see people who share similar views," he continued.

The word Pride invokes a lot of different meanings to a lot of different people.

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"Pride is a protest and a celebration, it is a joyful resistance in all that we are," said Emmett Jorganson, a teacher at McCall Middle School and an advisor for the QSA (Queer Straight Alliance). "It is being visible and pushing back against the forces that push back against us, and pushing for however much farther we still need to go."

Jorganson commented that at middle school, students are constantly growing, learning, and improving.

All Winchester residents celebrated PRIDEfest this year. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/TARA HUGHES

QSA is a student-led club at McCall Middle School where students discuss the topics of gender and sexual orientation in the community and around the world.

"It is awesome that [PRIDEfest] has gotten bigger and bigger every
There is more and more community involvement and more and
people attending which is great!" said Jorgensen. "I am very grateful for

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this community, and very grateful for the community partners that really care about queer and trans folks, and queer and trans youth who want to put on a big event like this and really invest in their community as a whole."

To Tony Leone, the executive director of NAGLY (North Shore Alliance of GLBTQ Youth), Pride is, "A collaboration of efforts, people coming together, whether it would be representation in a community or strong allyship and working together to uplift queer voices, and LGBTQIA+ voices, especially our youth."

Executive director of the Network for Social Justice Rebecca Slisz said to her Pride is literally pride.

"Being proud of who we all are and being comfortable and proud of every part of our identities," she said.

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More than 25 organizations came out to the town common to celebrate PRIDEfest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/TARA HUGHES

Slisz reiterated that community was what held everything together. PRIDEfest, along with other celebrations such as Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage and Indigenous Peoples Day, were all about building that community.

The Network for Social Justice fosters a movement for systemic change to advance equity and inclusion in the town of Winchester and beyond.

A big undertaking

Many different organizations set up booths around the park, giving out bracelets, stickers and food while educating attendees about the importance of Pride. The park was decorated with Pride flags, banners, colors, and balloons.

The environment was one of joy and celebration, and drag queen DJ and emcee Maxine Harrison brought it to another level. Attendees ranged from young kids to middle school children, to educators and administrators.

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Winchester residents of all ages came out to celebrate PRIDEfest on June 12. WINCHESTER NEW
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One of the booths was run by Leone, the program director at NAGLY, an LGBTQ+ youth center in Salem. Leone said NAGLY provides social, emotional learning, mental health, and drop in hours for any LGBTQIA+ questioning youth ages kindergarten to 23.

The youngest population works on play skills and hangs out. As they move on to middle school, the balance starts to shift toward education and how to be a successful queer young adult. The adult population works on resume building, life skills and other activities to be able to live as a queer adult in the world.

Leone has attended PRIDEfest for four years. He said it has definitely grown since he started attending and the facilitators do a wonderful job running such a big event.

The biggest thing to Leone is visibility. He explained it is super important for people who don't know this event is going on, people driving by or people living in the community, to see this and maybe come out next year.

A lot goes into planning an event of this magnitude.

"It takes a lot of communication and networking, it takes a lot of visibility. A lot of strong support from the school system. Legislation and the leaders of our community to come together and be on the same page," added Leone.

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A celebration of Pride at PRIDEfest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/RICHARD HOWARD

Slisz agreed.

“Because this is the fifth year, we have an idea of what we would like it to be, and we have people who come year after year,” she said.

“This year is especially important,” added Slisz. “People are feeling vulnerable or scared and it is good to see so many people out in public supporting our LGBTQ+ community.”

Slisz continued by saying there are still hateful comments about the LGBTQ+ community.

“We [Network for Social Justice] have a student internship program and we hear from some of the students that there are still comments made and things on social media and ways in which people are not being kind to each other,” continued Slisz.

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Her solution was to speak up against hateful speech, which is something everyone can work on. Slisz said this can affect relationships with family, friends, peers and other people in the community.

A look at some of the organizations at PRIDEfest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/RICHARD HOWARD

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State progress

Also in attendance at PRIDEfest were Vice Chair of the Select Board Anthea Brady, Vice Chair of the School Committee Timothy Matthews, Rep. Michael Day and Sen. Jason Lewis.

Their messages were one in the same: Massachusetts and Winchester will always stand by the LGBTQ+ community and protect that community.

Day proclaimed that while the federal government has been cutting the budget for trans youth care, Massachusetts has, in contrast, doubled its budget.

Sen. Jason Lewis, left, Select Board Vice Chair Anthea Brady and Rep. Michael Day spoke at PRIDEfest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/RICHARD HOWARD

Massachusetts has added $1 million for gender affirming care, requiring it to be provided in community hospitals, he said. In addition, $2 million was added to Planned Parenthood, the largest source of reproductive care in the nation.

"In the face of hatred coming out of Washington D.C. and other parts of the country," Day declared, "we here in Massachusetts say no! We celebrate who we are in all stripes of who we are! We love the diversity tha

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here in Massachusetts and we will safeguard that diversity and make sure we push our love out of Massachusetts into the rest of the country."

Lewis had a similar view. He said celebrating Pride has taken on a greater meaning recently. Facing a president and his administration who are targeting the LGBTQ+ community and especially trans folks, Lewis said the president is causing increased fear and discrimination in the LGBTQ+ community.

However, the senator said residents can draw some comfort knowing they live in Winchester and Massachusetts, "a place that believes in the dignity of every single person. Where we affirm and protect our LGBTQ community, especially the most vulnerable, such as our trans youth."

Lewis proudly announced, "Here in Massachusetts, we will stay true to our values no matter what! We will not be bullied, we will not be cowed, we will have your backs!"

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One of the organizations at PRIDEfest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/RICHARD HOWARD

PRIDEfest has certainly grown over the last five years, from just an idea from a middle school student, to a single booth at the town common which then transformed into a big celebration of Pride.

Slisz said the current model is having people engage with Pride, but she hopes that in the future, this will be more than just an afternoon of fun for most people.

“The next levels are educating and advocacy.” explained Slisz. “So, having people not just come out for an afternoon to have a good time, but to continue to learn about people who may be different than them in some way, and then work together to advocate for policies and practices that are respectful and treat people equally.”

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'Chicago: Teen Edition' dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents "Chicago: Teen Edition," a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. Set in the 1920s, this iconic production is sure to leave the audience wanting more. Performances will

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